

HEAVIEST CORNER ON EARTH (COMMERCIAL
BUILDINGS)

Birmingham Industrial District
1st Ave. N. & 20th St. N.
Birmingham
Jefferson County
Alabama

HABS No. AL-927

HABS
ALA
37-BIRM,
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, DC 20013-7127

ADDENDUM TO
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Location: Intersection of First Avenue North and 20th Street, Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama.

Date of Construction: 1902-1912

Designer/Engineer
Builder/Fabricator: Birmingham architects in association with national firms

Project Information: This report is based upon written documentation donated by the Birmingham Historical Society, reformatted to HABS/HAER guidelines.

Significance: The Heaviest Corner showcases both the Chicago and New York architectural traditions in the design of skyscrapers. Designed by important local architects in association with national firms (on three of the four buildings), the earliest buildings, the Woodward and the Brown Marx, are good examples of the Commercial style, with exteriors strongly reflecting the skeletal structure. The Woodward Building (the first steel frame building in the city) introduced the innovative technologies of the skyscraper form--steel frame construction, terra cotta fire-proofing and decoration, internal plumbing, and the use of electricity to light and heat interior spaces--to Birmingham. The later two Neoclassical Revival style skyscrapers, the American Traders-John Hand Building and the Empire-Colonial Bank Building, are extravagantly adorned towers decorated with granite, marble and glazed terra cotta in skilled interpretations of classical motifs.

Description: The four buildings at the intersection of First Avenue North and 20th Street in the Birmingham city center include the 10-story Woodward-NBC Bank Building, the 16-story Empire-Colonial Bank Building, the 16-story Brown-Marx Building and the 21-story American Traders-John Hand-AmSouth Bank Building. Located at a major intersection in the

Birmingham city center, they are easily accessible from public streets.

Birmingham District companies were nationally at the forefront of vertical integration. These four large office towers reflect the importance of these large integrated companies and their financial partners in the development of iron, mining and transportation industries in the District. Just as the Birmingham industrialists adopted the new technologies in coal and iron, so they adopted the innovative engineering and building technologies and styles being developed in Chicago and New York. Consequently, this unique massing of early skyscrapers is unequalled in the South.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The four early skyscrapers constructed from 1902 to 1912 on the corners of the major intersection of the city are a rare and perhaps unique concentration of skyscrapers. They were built to provide office space for the burgeoning industrial corporations as well as service oriented firms at a peak period of the Birmingham District's development. These urban giants were developed by prominent local banks and businessmen and built by architects and contractors who were attracted to Birmingham during its early 20th century boom. The unique massing of skyscrapers created a new scale for the developing city. Elephantine in appearance, these soaring modern inventions dwarfed the sequence of delicate late 19th century facades which once lined First Avenue and 20th Street, and when their available office space filled to capacity, local boosters declared them the "Heaviest Corner on Earth." They are among 13 skyscraper office buildings constructed in the city center prior to World War I.

CONDITION

In the 1980s significant renovation and restoration efforts focused on the Woodward and the Empire Buildings, both major TAX ACT projects. The elevator lobby of the Empire Building was restored and exterior terra cotta cleaned. A 1930s ground-level modernization of the Woodward was removed and the skyscraper's exterior restored to its original appearance. The Brown Marx, long considered the largest office building in the South and long the headquarters of TCI-U S Steel, and the John Hand Building have not undergone major renovation in recent years. One threat is low occupancy in the Brown Marx and John Hand Buildings.

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The Heaviest Corner on Earth includes:

Woodward-National Bank of Commerce (NBC) Building (1902)

1927 First Avenue North, SW Corner

Architects: Stone Brothers, New Orleans; William C. Weston, Birmingham (former associate of Daniel Burnham, Chicago)

Contractor: John Griffiths & Sons, Chicago

Engineers: Purdy & Henderson, Chicago

Brown-Marx Building (1906, 1908)

2000 First Avenue North, NE Corner

Architect: William C. Weston

Empire-Colonial Bank Building (1909)

1928 First Avenue North, NW corner

Architect: Carpenter & Blair, New York, William L. Welton & William C. Warren, a former associate of McKim Meade and White, New York), associate architects

Builder: T. C. Thompson and Sons

American Traders-John Hand-AmSouth Bank Building (1912)

17 20th Street North, SE Corner

Architect: Uffinger and Mowbray, New York; William L. Welton, associates

Contractor: Fred A. Jones Building Company

Sources Consulted

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Morris, Philip; White, Marjorie, Cinderella Stories - Transformations of Historic Birmingham Buildings, Birmingham Historical Society, 1989.